

Struggle and Achievement

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High school is, in many ways, an experience many would rather not relive, even in memory. As I reflect on my experiences at the Kalamazoo Area Math and Science Center (KAMSC), I am struck by how positive my memories are. For me and many of my classmates, our educational experiences up to that point had not been especially challenging, and were therefore somewhat unrewarding. Once we started at KAMSC that changed. It became commonplace to struggle, and, ultimately, to triumph.

I vividly remember working on my ninth-grade biology research paper, “Stem-cell transplantation versus autologous bone marrow transplantation for treatment of leukemia,” poring over journals at the local university library with college students eyeing me suspiciously. The sense of accomplishment when I finally was able to grasp what a journal article was saying, and even more so when I finished synthesizing multiple articles into one cohesive paper, was unlike anything I had previously experienced.

The relationship between struggle and achievement was one that stayed with me and ultimately helped me to succeed throughout the rest of my schooling. I am a firm believer in perseverance and that victory cannot truly be appreciated without challenge. It is a lesson that I must remind myself daily as a first year OB/GYN resident at an extremely busy hospital. In moments of frustration, I am able to remember how exhilarating it feels to prevail over a problem, to finally succeed at a difficult task.

It was not only that joy of overcoming a difficult situation that KAMSC taught me, but also how to deal with that situation initially. It was a new experience for me to have to ask for help, to become frustrated academically, to perform to a level lower than to what I was accustomed, and to be surrounded by students having the same experience and teachers who were willing to help. Learning to deal with the aggravation of not being immediately able to perfectly complete a task is certainly an

important lesson, and is extremely difficult to master for people at any age. I can only imagine it from the perspective of our educators—frustrated fourteen to eighteen-year-olds, used to everything coming easily, fraught academically for the first time.

The teachers at KAMSC were what made the education outstanding—they knew exactly how hard to push us, how to support without providing a crutch, how to challenge and encourage. After 21 years in some form of schooling, and who knows how many instructors, my two favorite teachers are from my years at KAMSC. They were by no means the easiest, nor did they teach my best subjects. In fact, the subjects they taught were two that I have barely revisited since, not at all during medical school, and only briefly while earning my B.A. in biology and creative writing.

I’m still not sure what it was about them that made them my favorites; it is a subject I have pondered often, as I teach medical students and undergraduates alike. I think that the most striking aspect was their unwillingness to accept anything but our best. You would never hear “I can’t” or “it’s too hard” uttered in their classrooms because every student knew that was intolerable. You could, and did, ask for help, often and repeatedly, and you were never alone, in frustration or in success. It was the challenge, combined with each teacher’s complete belief that we were capable of anything, that drove us to strive for more than we had imagined.

While college, medical school, my residency, and my personal life have taught me what to think and what to think about, I truly believe that it was my experiences at KAMSC, academically and socially, during my formative years, that taught me *how*. KAMSC provided a safe, comfortable environment for us teenagers at a seminal time, and I truly believe that it contributed greatly to the success of the past eighteen years worth of alumni, and will for many more for the years to come.

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